

An English country millwright at the end of the 19th century: Thompson's of Alford in Lincolnshire

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The closing years of the 19th century witnessed the progressive closures of wind and watermills in the countryside due to the establishment of large port based steam mills, using imported grain and distributing the flour via the expanding rail network. It was therefore a very brave young man, just out of his apprenticeship, who bought a millwright business and was able to expand his trade, and establish a reputation for good work, that meant his business continued working into the 21st century. That man was Robert Thompson, who started it in May of 1877 and ran it right up to his death in January 1933 when his son, John Edgar, in later life always known as Jack, took over and continued until his own death in January 1974. Jack left the business to his foreman, Jim Davies who in turn handed control to his son, Tom Davies, who carried on the trade until his retirement in 2013. In all, 15 ledgers of the records of the company, from 1877 to 1977, were carefully retained and it is with the kind permission of Tom Davies that these were made available for study and publication of this paper which deals with the early years – 1877 to 1900. The full list of ledgers is given in Appendix 1. The currency at that time was £sd and extracts from the ledgers are quoted in those units. Using “The Historical Value of the £” the value of £100 in 1877 equates to £11,000 in 2018, and £100 in 1900 equates to £12,300 today. Where appropriate these conversion factors have been used in the text.

Robert Thompson was born in 1855 to Francis and Mary Ann Thompson at the Victoria Tavern, Albert Street, in the village of Sutton about 2½ miles north east of Hull. The census of 1871 shows the family still resident at the Tavern which was also a brewery. Robert is recorded as aged 15 and a millwright and engineer, which indicates that he had taken an apprenticeship at one of the Hull millwrights the year before when he was 14. The nearest of these to Sutton was Edward Boyd, millwright, iron and brass founder and engineer based at Hope Iron Works, 74, Holderness Road. This works was about 2½ miles from the Victoria Tavern and the distance would have been walked by Robert in a little over ½ hour for his 10 hours a day for 6 days a week.

His wage, at 14 years old in 1869, would have been about 2 shillings a week. This would increase over his 7 year apprenticeship, which would be completed in 1876, when as a millwright he would have been earning about 22s a week or 4½d per hour. In those 7 years he would have gained experience and an in depth knowledge of all aspects of wind, water and small steam powered mills. Robert Thompson must have been a quick learner and trusted employee as in 1875, at only 20, he was the foreman for Boyd's in the building of Stallingborough Mill in North Lincolnshire, close to Grimsby and Cleethorpes. As a foreman his wage was probably about 30s a week, or 5s per day, compared to 3s 6d a day for the men. It is interesting to note that in an item in the Hull and Eastern Counties Herald of July 1869 “Mr Boyd, millwright, Hull, said the charge for a man in their trade was from 5s to 7s a day”. This shows the mark-up charged on labour to the customer was about 40%.

In his work at other mills in the county Robert Thompson not only became known to millers and mill owners but also became aware of opportunities for himself to advance his career. It seems likely that he was more interested in becoming his own boss, as his father was, and once out of his apprenticeship began searching for a millwright business to buy. In 1872, Whites Directory records a total of 483 corn mills in Lincolnshire and 25 millwright businesses, 19 of which were family owned concerns, and if one was for sale he would probably have known about it. By early 1877 he had found such an opportunity in mid Lincolnshire. This was the business of Edward Wheatcroft in the West End of Alford. Records show that Edward Wheatcroft had taken over the business by 1868 from the Oxley family who founded it in the early part of the century, when they not only maintained windmills but also built them. Wheatcroft had joined the firm in about 1830 as a boy, becoming foreman in the 1850s and then the owner of the well-established and equipped millwrights, who also built small steam powered stone mills, one of which was at Huttoft.

In 1877 Edward lived in a large plot of land with his house adjacent to, and opening onto, Hamilton Place while the buildings housing the millwrights had access to Parsons Lane. He was 62 and was probably looking to retire and sell the business, so he divided the plot retaining his house and some land and thus separating the business, which Robert bought in May 1877. It consisted of the yard, buildings, tackle, tools and consumables to carry on the trade, but without a house, so Robert would initially have had to live in nearby lodgings. No inventory for 1877 exists but one is recorded in the Stock Book for December 1932.

While the actual tools described in 1932 may not be the same as in 1877, the same equipment would have been held in 1877 except the tractor, plough and petrol tank which were bought in March 1920. Without these items the value

Dec 31 1932.		Tackle & Tools.	
2 Sets Poles	3	Files Various	22 1 11
2 Dradles complete	2	Sail Chisels	4 17 6
2 Ladders	1	Saw Bench	5 - -
1 Saw Shop.	10	Laths	5 - -
2 Cradles	5	Drilling Machine	7 - -
1 Grindstone	2	Engine + Shed	9 - -
3 Trunks	3	3 Benches with Vices	3 - -
1 Petrol Tank	1 5	1 Lath Rest	1 - -
1 Blower	10	Shafting Pulleys & Belting	3 - -
1 Prover	2 6	Tackle Rope & Chains Small Tools	
10 Hand Chisels (New)	10	+ fittings in shop.	40 - -
2 Fillet Pads	5 8	Tractor, Plough &c.	12 - -
39 Waste Plates @ 10"	1 12 6		111 19 5
2 Paint Brushes	18 -		
3 Saw Tools	2 6		
3 Saw	1 6		
5 Saw	1 3		
1 Tar Brush	3 -		
	22 1 11		

Fig. 1. Stock Book, December 31st 1932.